

# Letter: 51e 107 W Kelly, -, 1846

by John Nelson Darby

*Faith must be wrought by the operation of the word of God, received on His direct authority without any warrant, and the authority of scripture is superior to the authority of the church.*

**Scripture:** John 2:24

**Topics:** "Authority of Scripture", "Faith and Unity"

## Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the importance of recognizing the distinction between the means of communicating Christ's religion and the rule of faith, arguing that true saving faith comes solely from the direct authority of God's word. He critiques Romanism for relying on church authority rather than the scriptures, asserting that faith must be rooted in God's testimony rather than human interpretation. Darby highlights the inadequacies of the Roman Catholic Church in preserving the authenticity of scripture and maintaining unity, ultimately concluding that only the Spirit of God can produce true unity among believers.

## Transcript

p107 [W Kelly] [To the same.] MY DEAR BROTHER, - It is very important to observe that Romanism does take infidel ground, and to press this on their consciences; I have often done so in Ireland. God is competent to make men responsible by speaking Himself. This is a most important proposition, and this is the one thing they have to defend, by His own testimony, that is. In their arguments there is a grand fallacy, namely, that the means of communicating Christ's religion is the same thing as the rule of faith. This is a fundamental fallacy of Milner's "End of Controversy." A mother, a child, may be the means of communicating Christ's religion, but they are not a rule of faith. These two things may be united, but they are in no way the same things. I suppose the book you have, however, is Wiseman's.

Now I would take the bull by the horns, and say that there is no living saving faith whatever, but that which is wrought by the operation of the word of God, received on His direct authority without any warrant whatever. If it is received on the authority of the church, it is not believing GOD. The word of God proves itself to the conscience, and puts man by itself under the responsibility of crediting it, because God cannot speak without man's being bound to know and hear Him, for none speaks like Him. He may in grace use proofs and confirmations and witnesses, but man is bound to hear Him. God will prove that, in the day of judgment. Nay, the very heathen are without excuse on much lower ground. The reason is plain, too, practically. The word of God judges, and is not judged - "he is convinced of all, he is judged of all;" and the secrets of his heart being revealed, he falls down and confesses "that God is in you of a truth." That is not

authority, but it is the only saving thing. A man does not want authority to know that a two-edged sword is sharp. A faith founded on miracles, though God vouchsafed this confirmation, is no saving faith at all; Jesus did not commit Himself to it (John 2), He knew what was in man. But then in the corruption of the church and its prevalent power, it may be a reason why none but those who receive the love of the truth should escape. But this power of the word by the Spirit acting on, not judged by, man, supposes the unbeliever; all else is no faith at all. But the church has the Spirit and the word, and the spiritual man judges all things.

Hence then, I first take the ground, that the word of God received on authority, is a rejection of God's testimony. If I receive an account of another because you put your name to it, it is because I do not believe the person who gives the account. God may providentially make it to be received where this genuine faith is not, but then it is not saving. To be saving it must be faith in God; "he that hath received his testimony, has set to his seal that God is true:" he who demands the church's authority to receive it has not. God may have used all manner of means of preserving, and even authenticating the testimony, and so He has in many as we might expect; and I believe that the scriptures were committed to the church to keep - not to authorise, but to keep, as I keep a document safe. I give it no authority. It has its own. But I keep it safe. Now God, I believe, providentially has done this. But then the Roman body has decidedly failed in this, because at the Council of Trent, which is with them of divine authority, (it) has declared that to be scripture which declares itself not to be so. That is for example the [second book of] Maccabees, which concludes by saying, If I have done well, it is as befits the subject; if ill, it is according to my ability. Now it is profane to suppose for an instant that that is the Holy Ghost's inditing. The Prologus Galeatus indeed of Jerome, generally prefixed to the Vulgate, declares that the Apocryphal books are not scripture. Many other passages from the Apocrypha could be adduced, such as that the offerings for the dead were those dead in mortal sin - that there are three contrary accounts of the death of Antiochus - but I prefer the fact that one book of the Maccabees declares it is not scripture, as above. Moreover, it is well known, that Sixtus V., acting under the authority of the Council of Trent, promulgated as the only authentic word of God an edition of the Vulgate, which was suppressed, because his successor Clement altered it in two thousand places; five copies only of it are in existence. Clement's bears in appearance its name. It has been in no sense, what the church ought to be, a faithful keeper of the "oracles of God committed" to it.

But, after all, clever as Mr. Wiseman is, it is a vicious circle he is in; he takes the scripture as an authentic book. This itself then he supposes may be done. But if authentic, in the first place, it is clearly inspired, as any one who reads it may see - that is, it gives us (to say the very least, for I think it goes further) an authentic account of the actual authoritative teaching of Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and of the Lord Himself. If this be so, I have no need of the church to receive its doctrine as divine. The authentic record of Christ's words and the apostles' teaching, gives me a divine instruction directly, which no reference to a derivative authority can set aside; because the body which would set aside or call in question the authority of that from which it derives, is not derivative from it at all. If it be then authentic, I have the original divine instructions which founded, formed, and guided the church itself at first. If it be not authentic, then to find that the church was founded proves nothing, for if not authentic, I do not know it is true. If I am to receive the church from it, I certainly can receive Christ's and all the apostles' words from it directly. But I may go further. If it be not inspired as well as authentic, and if I do not know it to be so, I have no inspired warrant, that is, no divine warrant for hearing the church at all. So that on this ground you cannot set up the authority of the church, without setting up previously the authority of scripture itself. The authenticity proves inspiration, or it gives no inspired authority for the church, and I hear all Christ's and the apostles' inspired words, as well as that as to the church. For if I receive something a person says, and not the rest,

I receive none of it on his authority.

But indeed, when I examine the point further, I find the authority of this authentic book shewing me plainly a church indeed established, that is an assembly, but quite the contrary to the conclusion drawn from it. I find the test, of being of God, as to doctrine, to be, hearing the apostles themselves, "he that is of God heareth us." But I have their authentic words in this book. I am not of God, if I do not hear them, themselves, as the guard against error. When I turn to hearing the church, I find not a word about doctrine at all, but a case of discipline (any rules of which, according to Catholic doctrine, are not binding unless where received, though decreed by a Council; though they allege decrees on faith are. The discipline of the Council of Trent was not everywhere received). It is a question of wrong done, carried to two or three, and at last before the assembly, and if the wronging party will not mind the whole body, he may be avoided by the offended one as a heathen. Whereas, I find the scriptures referred (to) as the security in perilous times, and the certainty of having received the doctrines from the apostles, personally, - "knowing of whom." I find the Lord (whose words all of us would bow to as divine) yet preferring, as to the medium of communication, the written word; "if they believe not his writings, how shall they believe my words" - "they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them."

Now if we separate the rule of faith from the means of communicating Christ's religion - which last all admit may be, and is now fallible (consequently, the individual priest) - where is their accessible rule? Is it in the acts of nineteen Councils (and which are they? For you are aware that Romanists are not agreed which the nineteen are), acts in Latin moreover, or in Greek? Where is this accessible rule of faith? And now further, Romanists are not agreed what the rule is. Ultra-montanes hold the Pope infallible. Cis-montanes hold he is not. Many, as the Councils of Constance and Basle, hold that they had authority to act independent of and superior to the Pope. At the time of the former there were two Popes. The Council deposed them and chose another, who (Martin V.) dissolved the Council. Is the Council of Constance a general council? If so, it has given an authority in matters of faith quite different from the Papal advocates; and it acted on it and deposed the Popes; and yet if it had not this authority, the whole succession of the popedom is founded on a schismatical act. However that may be, the authority on matters of faith Romanists are not agreed on. Not only so, but these Councils have decreed things against the Pope's authority, and he against theirs. The acts at Basle the Pope declared void after the departure of his legate, having transferred the Council elsewhere, though only a part left. But further, the Council of Chalcedon declared the equality of the Sees of Constantinople and Rome. This Pope Leo rejected.

Now if a Roman Catholic say, I am not learned enough for all this; then I reply, Where is the simplicity and accessibleness of their rule of faith? For this is it. If you say, But I trust my priest; then you are on confessedly fallible ground. I had much rather trust, with God's help by the Spirit, the writings of Paul and Peter and John, &c., addressed to all saints - expressly so addressed. How fallible this is you may suppose, when I tell you that in the four standard catechisms published by the authority of different Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, there are not the same lists of the seven deadly sins. But this is by the bye. But is not there a fearfully upsetting thing, that the moment I do turn to the Bible - take the Roman translation - I find it sets aside all the cardinal points of Romanism.

For instance, the Mass - I read, there is no more oblation for sin. I am told by the highest authority of the Roman system, that the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead. Yet take away this, and all Romanism falls. Again, there is one Mediator. Now the Roman system makes many, and in fact more referred to than to Christ. And it is in vain to say that it is only as praying. Their merits are positively acted on in the Missal, and the Virgin Mary is called upon to save us now and at the hour of

death. Nay, so far is this carried, that the Confiteor on which absolution is received, leaves out Christ altogether.

The inadequacy of the scriptures to give unity is a mere claptrap. Has Rome produced it? Clearly not, unless by blood. Look at it from without. Authority, they say, was in the church from the beginning; if not, it is new, and good for nothing. Well, did it preserve unity? Witness the Greeks, Nestorians, Jacobites. Earlier, the Novatian system, Paulicians: Protestants - half professing Christendom at this moment is outside their unity. But their authority being alleged to be the original effectual thing, it is clear then it has failed to preserve it. They tried by fire and blood when Protestantism arose, but in half Europe in vain. Present facts then prove its inadequacy to this end. To say that it promotes unity among those subject to it, is merely what the smallest sect in Christendom would say too. I remember a poor Romanist telling me nine-and-thirty religions arose out of the Bible. I told him I suppose his did, or it was good for nothing, which he admitted, and I told him then there were forty. And really the argument is worth no more! Nothing can produce unity, but the teaching and power of the Spirit of God.

Ever affectionately yours.

1846.

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